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## The 'Ergi' Seidman: Contestations of Gender, Shamanism and Sexuality in Northern Religion Past and Present

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**ABSTRACT** *'Seiðr' is a term used in this paper to describe certain 'shamanistic' practices of Northern Europe, mentioned in the Icelandic Sagas. Today, seiðr practices are reappearing as 'neo-shamanism' in areas of Europe and North America. Both today and in the past, seiðr is often thought of as 'women's magic', although it is also practised by men. In this article, seiðr and other 'shamanisms' are viewed as dynamic, specific practices framed by community and cosmology, with potential for empowerment and resistance. We examine some accounts of men as seiðworkers, from 'saga times' and from present-day seiðmen in North America and Europe, to investigate contestations of gender and sexuality that are implicit in the practice of seiðr. The term 'ergi', applied as an insult to seiðmen and often understood with reference to sexuality, may more reasonably be interpreted as a stock insult based on fear: some seiðmen are now reclaiming it to describe their construction of self. Within 'postmodern' society, male seiðr practitioners may resist conventional definitions of masculinity, thereby creating changes within themselves and their communities.*

### Introduction

Increasing numbers of Western people are turning to accounts of past and/or indigenous religions or spiritualities in order to construct spiritual meaning within today's multi-vocal 'postmodern'<sup>1</sup> society. Some seek out ecstatic practices, but while these often involve appropriations from supposed 'simpler' (and therefore more pristine and idealised) societies, some neo-shamans look to 'indigenous' European traditions and practices mentioned in the sagas which were written in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The sagas, written some 200 years after Christianisation, cannot be regarded as impartial witness to pre-Christian practices. They do, however, form points of reference for ecstatic and religious practices which are being revived, rediscovered or reinvented today.

'Seiðr' is a 'shamanistic' practice that is being re-invented as community practice, as part of the 'Northern European' tradition, known as Heathenism or Ásatrú,<sup>2</sup> which is part of the wider corpus of Western Nature-religions, collectively known as Paganism or Neo-Paganism. This article is the work of an anthropologist and an archaeologist, who are discovering seiðr from different locations (including geographic locations in the UK and North America), by talking with seiðworkers and engaging with various forms of participation and observation (e.g. Blain, 1999; Wallis 1999b). Research includes observation and practice in the UK, Canada and the US; interviews (in person and via e-mail)



with seiðworkers and other 'Northern' religious practitioners in these countries and Iceland; and further material from discussions on e-mail lists, at festivals and other events.

Seiðr, past and present, seems to be most often thought of as 'women's magic'; yet, there were, and are today, men who engage with these practices. We examine some accounts of men as seiðworkers: today's interviews and the sagas written around 800 years ago that purport to describe activities of 1,000 years ago. The intent is to display some of the interweaving of narratives within the accounts of the present, and to ask how the discursive construction of 'seiðr' as gendered practice provides, for at least some of those who undertake it, both female and male, a means of resistance to today's dominant gender paradigms. In this 'multi-sited' research we juxtapose understandings of past and present, expressed by men practising 'shamanistically' within communities of Heathens, other Pagans and Shamanists, and other members of the public, with our own understandings of the saga material and of trance/ecstatic practice. The three men who form our main 'informants' are long-standing practitioners who developed their understandings independently of each other. They have been actively involved in promoting and teaching seiðr to others, and have been influential in the direction seiðr practice is taking. Our fourth informant is new to seiðr, discovering how the practices challenge his gender identity.

In explaining our own approach to this topic we draw on the recent theorising of shamanisms as active socio-spiritual constitution of relationships (involving human and non-human entities) in culturally and temporally specific ways. We draw on what has been aptly called a 'non-definition' of shamanism, which we treat more fully elsewhere (e.g. Wallis, 1999b; Blain, 1999). We explicitly do not claim seiðr practice as 'shamanism': we do view seiðr as shamanic and conclude that the urban Heathen community has potentially 'shamanic' aspects. In this article, we speak in the main with a constructed academic/practitioner voice, the authorial 'we'. Towards the conclusion, however, we engage in a dialogue of two distinct voices, a reminder of our own locations and agencies as academics and practitioners, situated within the discursive processes that we describe for others. The final section, on transformation, incorporates our own awareness (also described elsewhere) of what Young and Goulet (1994) term 'being changed' by research and practice.

### Seiðr as Women's Magic

Seiðr appears in accounts from the past, in the Norse Sagas and Eddic poems, most often as a female activity, 'women's magic', involving trance-journeying to gain knowledge of the future, or influence perception, thought or action. Male seiðworkers (*seiðmenn*) were spoken of as 'ergi', an insult relating to behaviour seen as 'unmanly'. Over the time of writing of the Sagas (approximately the twelfth–fourteenth centuries C.E., and hence 200 years and more since the 'conversion' of Iceland to Christianity), seiðr and other forms of magical practice seem to have been increasingly devalued and proscribed by church and state authorities, re-emerging within the late twentieth-century search for spiritual and cultural 'roots' and awakening of 'alternative' spiritualities.

One of the best known of the Icelandic sagas, *Eiríks saga Rauða*, holds an account of the seeress Þorbjörg who comes to a Greenland farm to prophesy.

From this account, much of the formal ritual of today's oracular seiðr practice has been derived (Blain, 1999). The seeress's divination, or prophesy, was aided by 'powers' or 'spirits' (*náttúrur*, derived from Latin *naturae*), and she entered a trance stage, assisted by the singing of a special song.<sup>3</sup> This divinatory practice was not the only 'magical' component of what a seiðworker might do, but it was the one most obviously resembling the trance-journeying of shamanistic practices elsewhere. Other components might include shape-shifting and drawing on the spirit world to bring help or harm to others. It is not clear precisely which of these activities were covered by the term 'seiðr'. In this article, we perceive 'seiðr' as a shamanistic activity, but believe that the meaning of the term changed over time and that seiðr was not the only 'ecstatic' practice. Old Norse did not lack in such terms: *fjölunnigr* meaning 'much-knowing', *hamramr* 'shape-strong', *völva* a woman who could see the future, and so forth. It is possible that 'seiðr' at one time referred specifically to the seeking of the assistance of spirits, in trance.

Definitions of shamanic practice vary. Eliade's (1964) outline of the 'shamanic complex' is still widely used, including several major components. Primary among these is the ecstasy gained by means of ascent to the sky or descent to underworlds, in a trance state; in either case, an 'otherworldly' experience. Often, 'shamanism' is described, by academics and popular 'new age' writers, as a potentially universal phenomenon, a 'shamanic complex' experienced by individuals, elaborated or explained in terms of individual spirituality or psychology, and permitted or proscribed within particular cultures. Oosten, however, comments that many authors describing "the shamanistic complex as a religious phenomenon" have been "mainly interested in the origin and the essence of the shamanistic complex and ... less concerned with its social dimensions. For the anthropologist of religion, however, these social dimensions are of crucial importance in order to understand the cultural significance of shamanism." (Oosten, 1984: 377)

Examining the history of shamanism and its study shows that 'shamanism' is an extremely problematic term, derived from the Tungus word 'saman' (Pentikäinen, 1998). In the eighteenth century, various Mandchu-Tungus language speaking 'tribes' in central Siberia, who named their ecstatic practitioners 'saman', were encountered by German explorers (Flaherty, 1992). The roles of these individuals varied, however, even among this handful of peoples: 'shamans' were not all the same (Hoppál, personal communication). While Westerners used terms from their own languages to describe these 'saman', such as 'wizard' in English, by the end of the eighteenth century, the German noun 'Schaman' and the verb 'schamanen' had become the generic terms (Flaherty, 1992).

In this way, 'shamanism' was born, originally a culture-specific term, extracted, essentialised and universalised into the Westernism we know today (Wallis, 1999a), subject to multiple competing definitions by which 'shamanism' is whatever the definer wants it to be—'shamanism' as culturally-sanctioned psychopathology, 'shamanism' as ability to control spirits, 'shamanism' as technique abstracted from culture. Academics find discrete definition elusive. Merkur (1992) has pointed out that each definition eliminates people who are, by other definitions, 'shamans'. For instance, the oft-cited meaning of 'master of spirits' (Shirokogorov, 1935) may be appropriate as a description of the Greenland Angakkoq as examined by Jakobsen (1999), but not necessarily for all others



whose practice may be usefully explored 'shamanistically', for instance the Huichol 'shaman', who describes himself on a path which is unending (Schultes & Hofmann, 1992). Such a definition confines the interpretation of both 'shaman' and 'spirits' by presupposing a one-dimensional relationship.

We feel that the endurance of the term 'shamanism' espouses its potential for careful application, in an approach to shamanism rather than according to globalising definitions. Dowson's 'elements of shamanism' (1999) embrace diversity to avoid the meta-narratives which definition embodies. Techniques of trance are embedded in specific social relations: shamans enter a trance in order to engage with a spirit world, and this engagement is socio-politically supported by the community. By focusing on the socio-politics of shamanism, as well as 'techniques' or activities in the spirit world, we can discern cross-cultural difference as well as similarity. The ways in which shamans and shamanic practices are sanctioned by their communities show how different shamanisms are across the world. The study of shamanism in this way is not monolithic (searching for the same thing everywhere, across space and time), because it emphasises difference. Neither is it vague: the shaman still assumes very specific social/spiritual activities.

These specific shamanisms are neither static nor bounded, but change with time and circumstances, so that shamans are active agents of cultural change, engaging in constant reinventions of practice, appropriating and reconstituting knowledge (Greene, 1998), working as political figures within contestations of community and identity (see e.g. Taussig, 1987; Pentikäinen, 1994). The view of shamanism as global, static and 'primal', we feel, owes much to the reluctance of Post-Enlightenment scholarship to seriously consider 'magic' as a valid topic for study (Tambiah, 1990). We think Seiðr was a shamanistic practice, involving aspects of shamanism (and possibly drawing on Saami practice). It was, however, not necessarily 'shamanic', because the communities of the time were not embedded in what, for want of a better term, might be described as a shamanic 'religion'. The reconstruction of Seiðr today may be said to be shamanistic, but not shamanic, for the same reasons.

In discussing identity among seiðworkers we treat seiðr as shamanistic practice embedded within culture and discourses (past and present) of gender and 'appropriate' behaviour. This is an explicitly socio-historic approach in which shamanistic practice cannot be understood apart from Oosten's 'social dimensions'. We deal with questions of how seiðworkers were regarded and regard themselves, within specific cultural and historical contexts of the tenth to twelfth centuries C.E. and the present-day, late twentieth-century revivals of heathenism in North America and the UK. Seiðr differs from other forms of shamanistic practices in that not all the Heathen (and Pagan) community accepts or is happy with its practice. Seiðr has certain connotations which people find (in the past and in the present) unacceptable (Blain, forthcoming).

Seiðr appears in the sagas as a marginal phenomenon, and the seiðworker is often feared or set apart from the community in some way. Seiðr may not be central to the community, but its practice is still community practice, based in cultural possibilities which existed for women and men in pre-Christian times (and which may have continued to exist for women, although in reduced form, throughout the Christian era; Blain, 1999). In the sagas, seiðr is primarily women's magic: *Ynglingasaga* holds that the first practitioner of seiðr was the

goddess Freyja, a major deity (ton, 1996), poem *Völundarkviða* name for Freyja as 'fordæð' (forbjörg, mentioned illusion-wives of Iceland episodes activities seems one Settlement her name actively people: a Jochens s

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goddess Freyja, who taught this magic to the god Odin (the master magician and a major deity in contemporary Heathenism). In the Eddic poems (e.g. Larrington, 1996), we are introduced to the *völva*, or prophetess, who speaks the great poem *Völuspá*, and to Heiðr (who may be Freyja herself or may be another name for the *völva* who is speaking). In the poem *Lokasenna*, Freyja is described as 'fordæða', a word for a (usually evil) magic-working woman. In addition to Þorbjörg, the seeress of Eiríkr the Red's saga, there are numerous women mentioned in the sagas who are described as *seiðkonur* (seiðwomen), or as illusion-workers or shape-shifters.<sup>4</sup> Some of these sagas deal with the everyday lives of Icelanders, and while they were composed some two centuries after the episodes they purport to record, people are portrayed in them as engaging in activities of a fairly usual kind, so that the concept of the seiðwoman or *völva* seems one that was generally acknowledged. In *Landnámabók*, the Book of Settlements (Pálsson & Edwards, 1972), we read of *Þuríðr sundafyllir*, who gained her name 'sound-filler' by calling fish into the sound, by means of seiðr, thereby actively engaging with spirits and the environment to provide prosperity for the people: a rare description of a *seiðkona* acting primarily for the community. Jochens says that

Tapping ancient custom embodied in oral tradition and reinforced by persistent social practice, these narratives ... give credence to a historic reality of prophetesses among pagan Germanic-Nordic tribes. Equally important, the literary proliferation of the sibyls in the thirteenth century suggests that they were part of the contemporary perception of pagan times. (Jochens, 1996: 116)

Jochens (1996) sees seiðr (and other magical practices) and the women associated with it, increasingly portrayed as evil. In the fourteenth-century romances of 'old times' (*fornaldursögur*), dealing with the fantastical, the seeress becomes like the 'wicked witch' of more recent folk-tales (see e.g. Arrow-Odd's saga). This is prefigured in thirteenth-century accounts of Gunnhildr, queen variously of Norway and York, later known as King-Mother, who is described as working seiðr in Egils saga (Pálsson & Edwards, 1976) and *Njáls saga* (Magnusson & Pálsson, 1960), and in *Heimskringla* (Haralds saga hárfagra) (Monsen, 1932), of learning seiðr from two 'Finnish' *seiðmenn*, and being the 'most-knowing' woman of her age. Her reputation is bad. She is an historical figure, a woman exercising power in a man's world, and the accounts are written from the points of view of the descendants of those who were her opponents.<sup>5</sup> She is portrayed as initiating the chain of events which start the feuds in which first Gunnar, then Njáll and his family become enmeshed, by the spell she casts on a lover who wishes to return to Iceland.

References to men as seiðworkers are fewer, but they do exist. Thus, we are told in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* that "Þorgrímr hastened to his seiðr and built a scaffolding and worked fjölkyngi with all ergi and skelmiskáp (devilry) ..." (Ch. 10).<sup>6</sup> Kotkell of *Laxdæla saga* uses both seiðr and *galdr* (sung spells, often associated with rune magic), which is more often associated with men. However, seiðr and *galdr* appear entwined together—Kotkell builds a seiðr-platform, ascends it, and with his sons chants *galdr* to raise a storm. One of the half-brothers of Eiríkr Blóðøx (Gunnhild's husband) is described as a *seimaðr*, *Rögnvaldr rettilbeini*, put to death by his half-brother and father, along with 80

other *seiðmenn*, for reasons that may have more to do with politics than religion (although both are, of course, always deeply entwined, indeed, inseparable in many societies).

The account of Óðinn's performance of *seiðr*, from *Ynglingasaga*, repeats the negative association of the term 'ergi' for men who are *seið*workers. While this was "the art in which the greatest power is lodged", its practice was accompanied by "such weakness and anxiety [ergi], that it was not thought respectable for men to practice it; and therefore the priestesses were brought up in this art" (Laing, 1844).

It is necessary to place these gendered accounts in historical, cultural and political context. They were written long after the occurrences they purport to describe, within a christianised Iceland which was part of the European political system. They say more about discourses on 'magical' practice in the thirteenth than in the tenth century. We do not know how the people of the tenth century considered *seiðr*, but it is unlikely that one view would have prevailed. The accounts themselves are at times supportive, at times critical, and often magic is mentioned when it is performed against the leading figures of the sagas. Context and description may bear multiple interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, although we have not seen this discussed elsewhere, there remains the possibility that the mostly-female gendering of 'seiðr' in the literature relates in part to connections with Sámi shamanism. The Sámi of the time of the sagas are traditionally accepted as being a shamanic people, developing trade links with their Norse neighbours (Hultkrantz, 1994). In repeated instances, Norse women (such as Gunnhildr) are described as trained by 'Finnish sorcerers', generally considered to have been Sámi shamans.<sup>8</sup> Recent Sámi shamanism is gendered: their shamans were male, often with female assistants. Elsewhere, shamanism often tends to be gendered; for instance, most San shamans are male (Katz, 1981) and Korean shamans are mainly female (Kendall, 1996). We speculate about a possible link between the mostly male gendering of Sámi shamans and the mostly female gendering of *seið*workers of the sagas, if the female *seið*worker came to be trained as 'assistant', as Sámi females were. Additionally, the strict gendering of Sámi shamanism may have been less pronounced in saga times, as 'Finn' women are spoken of in the sagas as working shamanistic magic, although it is not clear that they were doing so on behalf of the community, as the mediator between people and spirits. Male Sámi shamans, on the other hand, were acting as specialists for the community (Pentikäinen, 1984).<sup>9</sup>

### Men Who Do *Seiðr* Today

Today's *seið*workers, drawing directly on accounts from the Sagas and Eddas, are in a sense living the stories, inserting themselves into the narratives and attempting to reconstruct *seiðr*-practice. Such reconstructions are challenged both within and without the community of Heathens, by those who say that there is little evidence for *seiðr*, that the details are not known, or that *seiðr* was 'evil magic' done primarily to effect ill fortune. In reply, *seið*workers point to links between their practice and other forms of shamanism, healing, and divination. This is a debate about narrative and meaning, which occurs within a framework of reconstructed spirituality and religious belief. The reconstruction takes place within a late twentieth-century world, using its discourses and



assumptions about gender, magic, 'evil', religion and shamanism, which may be very far removed from the discourses and assumptions of tenth-century practitioners.

Today's seiðworkers read the saga material, they know the reputation of seiðr and the taunts of 'ergi' that were applied even to the god Óðinn. Yet for seiðworkers, their work is integral to identity formation. We discuss four present-day male seiðworkers with different degrees of experience of seiðwork, for whom the meanings of 'seiðr' differ, and who have come to their practice by diverse routes.<sup>10</sup> They speak of their entry into seiðr and of the ways in which their seiðwork is implicated in identity construction. For example, Jordsvin speaks of what seiðr means for him, in general:

I'm a satisfied customer ... it has enriched my life... And, ah, I am satisfied it's real. I'm happy with it. It seems to be a service to the community. Do I enjoy doing it? Yeah. I like my animal spirits, I visit with them. I like the journey work, I've gotten directions through the underworld journey on how to get to see Ran and Eigir and how to see the Svartalfar and their forges... you start building up your own cosmology, within a cosmology, you start learning how to do things, and I'm very happy... (Jordsvin, 1996)

The sense of enrichment is echoed by our other informants. How do they reconcile the reputation of seiðr with their everyday lives? They are not thrill-seekers, nor are they attempting to shock the uninitiated. They have day-time jobs, social connections outside Heathenism, families or partners. Within Heathenism, they regard themselves as community workers—although for them, 'community' may include not only humans, but animals, plants, deities, land-spirits, and at times 'ghosts'. Their work may include divination (high-seat seiðr or the trance journey in quest of answers to specific questions of others; Blain, 1999), mental-health work, healing, dealing with spirits, 'unhaunting' on behalf of others, and particularly for Bil, the seiðman who comes closest to fulfilling the 'elements of shamanism', working with those who are dying, to ease their spiritual transition. Yet, as already mentioned, they read the literature and know the reputation. They point out that while many people within the Heathen community have an interest in seiðr and may engage in solitary shamanistic practice, relatively few—and even fewer men—are anxious to learn to become community seiðworkers.

Here we return to the epithet 'ergi' applied to male seiðworkers, among others. This has often been glossed by scholars and Heathens alike as 'passive homosexual', with various colourful descriptions of imagined seiðr activity given to account for it (see e.g. Jochens, 1996: 74). Within Heathenism or Ásatrú, some have expressed the opinion that "seiðr is for women and gay men" (noted on an Ásatrú e-mail-list). This is tinged with homophobic implications. That heathenism is not immune to the homophobia of the wider society is evident from Jordsvin's experiences:

I occasionally get bigoted rants via e-mail, usually from young males high on testosterone and bravado, usually with blatant homophobic content. Large sections of the Heathen community really need some education on this matter.

Homophobic implications may extend to all male seiðworkers. Our third seið-

man, Malcolm, says:

Having been practising seiðr for a good while now, the 'ergi' accusation gets thrown at me on a regular basis, usually with some very uneducated and childish interpretations along with it.

There are indeed a number of gay male seiðworkers, although they do not define the field. Jordsvin is involved with training others—female and male, gay and straight. He says:

The concept of sexual orientation per se is a modern one. There do seem to be references in the lore connecting men who do seiðr with men who have sex with men, more specifically, men who are in the receptive role during such activities. Obviously, this should not be an excuse for bigotry against gay people today. Gay men and women seem often to show a knack for seiðr, but heterosexual men can and do learn it and do it quite well

Interpretations of 'the lore' are not constant, however, even among today's seiðworkers. Bil points out that

I have not read anything which would lead me to pop to the conclusion 'Oh, Eyvinder and Rögnvald must be gay'. That seiðr was not much liked during the late Viking era is quite obvious... I can think of several things about seiðr that people could find disgusting (Oðin's little practice of necromancy probably raised a few eyebrows). To call something an aberration or a name which indicates unusual (to the average public) sexual practice when it is disliked by a group of people is a fairly common thing among the various Germanic peoples and Europeans at large.

Malcolm also considers that 'ergi' may have a broader meaning than specifically sexual behaviour. He interprets 'ergi' in terms of rejection of conventional masculine ideology, including, today, rejection of violence as a first line approach to dealing with interpersonal problems. There can be many speculations as to the reasons for the application of the epithet in the past. It may have had the primary meaning of 'coward', which a related word still has in present-day Scots.

In the poem Lokasenna, Óðinn and Loki use the epithet 'argr' of each other. Opinions differ in the heathen community on how this should be interpreted. On the one hand, as the accusation against Loki relates specifically to sexual activity, it is claimed that the meaning is to become 'like a woman' or to be 'used' 'like a woman'. (Loki turned himself into a mare and bore a foal.) This links with the interpretation of 'argr' or 'ergi' as involving sexual contact, 'passive' or 'receptive' homosexuality, so that when Loki states:

But you once practised seiðr on Samsey  
and you beat on the drum as witches do (*völur*, *volvas*, seeresses)  
in the likeness of a wizard (*vitki*) you journeyed among mankind  
and I thought that showed an ergi nature,<sup>11</sup>

the implication is that Óðinn also had engaged in 'receptive' sexual practices. The counter-argument is that it is not one specific set of behaviours that is referred to, but more generally behaving in ways that would be seen as not within the usually-accepted masculine repertoire. Loki did something that was



'not masculine' (giving birth to a foal) and Óðinn did something else that was also 'not masculine' (performing seiðr, beating a drum, journeying as a *vitki* or sorcerer, activities associated in this culture with women). The words 'passive' and 'receptive', in this discourse, are worth an article in themselves, implying a direct equation of homosexual practice with a model of heterosexuality that is heavily reliant on 'active male, passive female' constructions: a twentieth-century psychological/psychoanalytic elaboration of nineteenth-century ideas about womanhood, severely criticised from feminist and queer theory approaches today (see e.g. Butler, 1993). However, they remain part of the discourse of both academics and heathens who read these passages. It may be more useful to regard the word 'ergi' as primarily an insult, that can be used to convey the meaning either of 'homosexual man' or of 'acted upon sexually' (as in treatment of defeated enemies), or simply 'coward', but need not definitively state this. Most of the uses of the word, including those in Lokasenna, are of the 'cowardly', 'effeminate' kind. This is how it is interpreted by some of the men who perform seiðr today. Bil says:

There is no reason to doubt that homosexuality existed at the time of the Vikings and that, at least, 'effeminism' and cowardice were two character traits which were frowned upon and that both were lumped into the category of 'ergi'. Also, it is fairly easy to tell that the seventh-twelfth century Norseman used the term as an insult. True connections between the terms 'ergi' and 'seiðr' are speculative at best. I think that an in-depth study of 'the practice of insults' might be in order. It would seem ... insults were not only to force the emotional hand of the insulted but were also (for third parties) 1) fairly common, 2) often involved sexual innuendoes, 3) contained a small grain of truth wrapped up in embellishment, and 4) rhetorically misdirecting leading the listener to make a character judgement based either on the embellishment rather than the 'grain of truth' or to make an altogether incorrect assumption about the insulted.

Malcolm, practising in Scotland, relates that the word 'argi' is still used there today.

I can remember the context of two uses. First was one where I was challenged (aged 15 or so) to fight someone, and refused, and was accused of being 'argi'... Oddly, when backed into a corner, dealing with it by throwing the attacker into a puddle and refusing to 'give him a good kicking', was still considered 'argi'. I got the impression that what was meant, was 'cowardice', in terms of holding back violence considered to be 'appropriate'. My relatively non-violent solution was considered 'argi', just as failure to fight at all was.

The second situation was when I was in a village talking to someone much later in life (in my 20s or so), and hearing a young man spoken of as 'argi' because he asked the police to deal with a threat against his sister, instead of dealing with it personally.

The utterance did not, apparently, imply 'gay' or 'homosexual', but 'coward, unmanly, not using the resources men are expected to use'. That is, it referred to constructions of gender, not sexuality. The terms locate men within discursive concepts of masculinity. Used with a context of present-day heathenism, they

carry mixed messages and position those who use them, or those of whom they are used, according to the discursive constructions of present-day masculinity. 'Ergi' may still be used as an insult; alternatively, it may be used by a practitioner to try to uncover, or explain, the meaning of his seiðwork or the ways in which his identity is changing or developing.

Often, this relates directly to the concept of seiðr as shamanistic practice, in which the seiðworker becomes an intermediary and interpreter between the community of humans and that of spirits, including ancestors and deities, associated with the human community or the land. Many seiðworkers, and other shamanistic practitioners, point out that this involves a loss of 'ego' or an abnegation of self or of privilege. Some relate this to the concept of 'ergi':

My sexuality is heterosexual. I was never approached by the ghosts who follow me to change that in any way. I was, however, severely 'lambasted' for carrying too much of a 'macho attitude' and was forced to make many changes in that area—so much so that folks often wonder, now, if I am homosexual or not... My eccentricity doesn't stem from sexuality or sexual preference but mainly from the fact that I have no emotional reactions any longer. (I have emotions; I just don't demonstrate reaction with them, that's all.) (Bil)

... Personally, I resonate with what Bil is saying, to an extent. I do react less than most people, very much so... Perhaps this is because emotion is so important to the seiðr work I do. It's like the fuel for the tools I use, so maybe I'm conserving it? (Malcolm, discussing Bil's statement.)

We return to Jordsvin's suggestion that gay men may have an advantage in practising seiðr, that they may be more "'called' to it, be a little better or learn it a little easier". It may be that men whose sexuality is ambiguous or who are marginalised because of sexuality are in a position where they must attend to levels of meaning that escape from or that are not obvious to those privileged by dominant discourses of gender. Lewis (1989) discusses, for instance, spirit possession as a way of reversing conventional power relations, as the claiming of power by people who otherwise have little. Conversely, feminist scholarship has pointed to needs for those in disprivileged positions to develop multiple ways of understanding the world. Dorothy Smith's 'bifurcated consciousness' comes to mind (Smith, 1987). If in today's society, women and gay men are more used to dealing with multiple understandings of social relations and interpreting one understanding in terms of another, this may, indeed, constitute an advantage in seiðr or any form of shamanistic practice.

Male seiðworkers are anomalous figures, working within a broad cultural framework in which dominant discourse rejects concepts of 'the spirits' or 'deities' (other than the Judeo-Christian one, that is), and yet within specific contexts or learning paths where spirits or deities are the teachers. There are issues here of suspension of control, for both men and women, but in Western society, the expectation is for men to have greater 'control'. Within indigenous shamanic practice, it is the shaman's spirit 'helpers' who indicate possibilities or work to be done, who set the pace and give directions. In accordance with indigenous shamans, and in contrast to Western society's expectations of them, these *seiðmenn* give accounts of working with spirits (in Bil's case, nine ghosts)



and relinquishing 'control'. Such experiences compare with anthropological descriptions of shamanic practice—texts that our informants are familiar with. We conclude this discussion as a dialogue. Each of us has observations and involvements with seiðr practice, bringing our own perspective to the work. Robert is an archaeologist researching the impact of neo-shamanism on archaeological and anthropological discourses, ancient sites, and indigenous peoples. Personal involvement with heathen shamanism requires that he explores the researcher-practitioner position. Jenny has been involved with community development of seiðr practices, as practitioner and researcher. Comments and analysis are therefore based on present/contemporary perspectives on gender and society, rather than on earlier perceptions. We speak each from where we are, attempting an understanding of shamanistic practice within small-scale religious communities on two continents. The basis of the discussion is the narrative of our fourth informant, James who is discovering himself as a seiðrworker while undergoing and analysing a series of personal transitions in the process. His experiences open the possibility for comparison with Bil, Jordsvin and Malcolm. James says:

In my own practices, seiðr focuses on both 'male' and 'female' deities, Woden and Freyja, in rituals of possession. The rituals also involve spirit creatures, including two lynxes, and a berdache. With these helpers my experience transcends conventional understandings of gender. At times it can be described as experiencing female, or male, or both. It is sometimes difficult to express how the experience is gendered. This is something I am still learning to come to terms with, explain and interpret.

I think many people (especially men) would find seiðr disturbing because of how it makes them feel (apart from the radical change into shamanic consciousness), going beyond stereotypes of male, female, gay, etc. For me, seiðr with Freyja allows an integrating understanding of what it is to be male, female and other, multiple possibilities. That is empowering and affects how I live with my reality, world, local and spiritual communities. It changes who I am.

Jenny:

This is a very personal account that will 'make sense' to people who are using the same discursive frame of reference. It's situated knowledge: the account is specific to his situation and to his interaction with his deities. And it's cast as a political statement, a challenge to established gender discourses. A third (or fourth, fifth, sixth) gender, is a political location... Robert, you've seen the reverse situation, of women doing spirit-possession/god-possession with a male deity. How do you 'read' this in the light of that experience?

Robert:

Yes, I observed a possession ritual conducted by Diana Paxson and the Hrafnar community in San Francisco. This 'possession' is quite different to Malcolm's and Jordsvin's experiences, but they do coincide with James's. Hrafnar's rites involve possession by Odin for the purpose of

divination. The number of women and gay male participants suggests they certainly had a propensity for seiðr, but there were straight men and women also present who were equally as active in the proceedings. Besides personal choices about sexual orientation, the attraction of seiðr in Hrafnar, and among our four informants, clearly reflects on individuals who are actively questioning and engaging with what it means to be a gendered being. This exemplifies some of the difficulties that rigid (Western scientific) definitions of gender involve. Indeed, these and other ethnographic examples reveal difficulties with the definition of berdache, ergi and seiðr in terms of sexuality. Our culture is science based and requires categories based on biological sex to understand gender differences. I think, however, that people are not adequately defined in terms of what their reproductive strategy is or who they have sex with. I feel I am not adequately described as a complete person simply in terms of 'male' and 'heterosexual'. These categories are simply value-laden judgements which marginalise the rest of what makes people who they are. Similarly, seiðr for our informants challenges Western gender and sex categories and generalisations. These experiences of religious gender reorientation cohere with other ethnographic instances in which sex (defined biologically) loses clarity and standing because cultural view redefines what it is to be male, female, and other third, fourth (or multiple) genders, in meaningful ways. The dialogues with Malcolm, Jordsvin, Bil and James show how some Heathens are, within their own spiritual framework, examining gender and reinterpreting the past. What is more, Western society has to get to grips with gender issues such as these.

Jenny:

In a sense women may have it a bit easier than men do, in terms of seiðr acceptance. Because seiðr was described as female, and is presented as that still today, it's assumed that women seiðworkers can be categorised in ways that are acceptable socially and people get past that into at least some of the rest of 'who they are'. Whereas I've seen Jordsvin pigeon-holed, to some extent, as 'gay man' (which definitely is part of who he is, but doesn't define him or how he does seiðr, as he himself says); and Bil and Malcolm say that these questions arise. It's an example of an intersection of gender and sexuality that many in today's society find very hard to deal with. Women doing seiðr—or pretty well anything else—are still easily dismissed, unless they are very strong women who simply can't be. Part of the dynamic of what's going on in the community around seiðr relates to the people who have developed and promoted it and how they're viewed in the community, which has varied somewhat, but they are people who can't be easily overlooked. I'm seeing this as being much more about gender and power relationships than sexuality, at least in the past—the ways gender was constructed and used in the creation and maintenance of centralised power, for instance. Seiðr was contested and gender was contested, and the insult 'ergi' was used as part of this. And as we have said, the word may earlier have had different meanings—I'm thinking of current

Con  
Seiðr  
prac  
magi  
chan  
threa



debates over the words 'berdache', 'two-spirit', and 'alternate gender', within North American Native communities and within anthropology (e.g. Eppler, 1998). Now 'ergi' is part of today's discourse for people in the community and still used politically.

Robert:

Politically today indeed. Clearly some intolerant heathens have problems with seiðr, ergi and homosexuality, and link these three together. However, this has little to do with the past; they are simply imposing their own western ideas onto what seiðr may have been in the past, and translating that on to contemporary practitioners. 'Reviving' past religions is a political and contested act, just as archaeological approaches and any other interpretations are. But the experiences of our informants challenge any bigoted view that you have to be a woman or gay to practice seiðr today. That seiðr is empowering and life-transforming for its practitioners and the communities they work with, and facilitates the alteration of normative Western gender stereotypes, is the pertinent point. Also, they are not appropriating Native American or other indigenous spiritual traditions as other neo-shamans do: they are examining their own pasts (which, meanwhile, is equally controversial<sup>12</sup>). These benefits of avoiding appropriations of indigenous culture and re-evaluating the Western world-view, unfortunately seem to be all too often overlooked by homophobic or suspicious spokespersons in both Heathen and academic communities.

Jenny:

The socio-political element of seiðr links with your comments we incorporated earlier about seiðr being shamanistic, but not shamanic because it's not accepted by the whole community. But, I'm seeing changes in the community's relation to seiðr, which are interesting. Partly this is because of the ways the Heathen/Ásatrú communities here in North America are developing—those people who are most uncomfortable with seiðr and 'ergi' also tend often to be those who are most 'folkish' or right-wing and farthest politically from the mainstream. And as the communities are becoming more defined, people who are part of 'mainstream' Heathen practice are becoming much more exposed to seiðr and ideas of seiðrworking. Indeed some now say that seiðr is central to their thinking on Heathenism and relations with deities and spirits. This is fascinating—it's an opportunity to watch a potentially shamanic community in process of formation, and defining itself partly in opposition to non-shamanic communities.

### **Conclusion: Seiðr as Contested Practice**

Seiðr in the times described by the sagas appears to have been contested practice. These were times of political and religious change. Seiðr as ecstatic magic can be seen as a way in which people related to each other and to the changes around them. Seiðrworkers were seen to have power and so posed a threat to those who sought power through gendered centralising political

processes. However, then as now, specifics of the charges against seiðr can be understood only through an examination of the insertion of those women and men who engaged in ecstatic practice—and those who spoke against that—into the discourses and practices (economic, political and spiritual) of the times. The meaning of the term 'ergi' and its use may have changed as part of the major social transformations of the times, resulting finally in today's insult.

Similarly, the meanings that today's *seiðmenn* associate with seiðr have arisen from their researches and experiences, and from the ways in which they are treated by the communities within which they are practising or learning. They construct identity through a constant positioning of themselves within a community that can be at times hostile and distrustful of ambiguities, as they develop their community work. In developing their specific shamanistic practices, men and women are actively involved in research, in constituting meaning, in moving among discourses of past and present, even as they move between the worlds, or between realities, in their trance-working. Their lived experiences, therefore, reflect the meanings of the past, conveyed by the stories they have read, but are not defined or confined by these, as they interpret their experiences, creating a community within a community, developing and living their own stories today.

Studying seiðr as contested practice provides an opportunity to see shamanistic practice as dynamic and changing, actively constituting communities within 'postmodern' society. In attempting to understand the men who gave information for this paper, we are dealing with dynamics of gender and sexuality, discourses of power and resistance, and above all, people's claims to determine their 'selves', to be 'who they are'. This is contextualised within a supportive community that includes the other seekers around them, but extends to the natural and spiritual worlds from which they derive meaning for their everyday, political, and religious practices. The men and women who practise seiðr journey into areas that are strange to the majority of westerners today, and they construct their own relationships with what they meet there. In the process, their lives are transformed.

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arguments have been considerably strengthened by attention to the points raised.

## NOTES

1. We recognise that describing seiðworkers and neo-shamanism in terms of 'modern', 'postmodern', etc. is academic and artificial. Most neo-shamans and other people in society do not use these terms; they are simply living their lives. However, such labels have their uses in allowing academics to appreciate the socio-political locations of neo-shamanism within their own intellectual framework, and need not deny social agency and individual sensibilities.
2. For further information on Heathenism, see Blain, 1998, and Harvey, 1997.
3. The term 'náttúrur' is ambiguous, so it is unclear what sort of relationship the seeress had with the 'spirits'. It may have been shamanistic, possessive, or mediumistic. We avoid definitions that rigidly distinguish between these ecstatic practices, since, as Lewis argues, shamanism and spirit possession often occur together (Lewis, 1989). Whatever their differences with the past, today's seiðworkers also describe experiences that might be labelled shamanistic, possessive or mediumistic, or more correctly, all three.
4. These include two women in Kormaks saga, Thordis and Thorveig (Hollander, 1949). Thordis is mentioned also in Vatnsdæla saga (Jones, 1973), in what Stephan Grundy calls "a rare example of socially constitutive seiðr" (Grundy, personal communication). Some others are Kalla from Eyrbyggja saga, the 'Finnish' seiðworker from Vatnsdala saga, Oddbjörg of Víga-Glúms saga, Kjannok of Heiðarviga saga, Heimlaug of Gull-Þóris saga, and seeresses, *völur*, named Heiðr who appear in Landnámabók and Hrólf's saga Kraka, Örvar-Odds saga, and many others. (Indeed it seems that by the end of the saga-writing period, the name 'Heiðr' had become synonymous with 'seiðworker'.) Heiðarviga saga is accessible on the internet in English at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Heitharviga/> and Icelandic at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/heidarv.htm>, Gull-Þóris saga at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/gull.htm>. Accessible translations of Arrow-Odd's saga by Edwards and Pálsson (1970), Hrólf Kraki's saga and Eirík the Red's saga by Jones (1982), Víga-Glúm by Hollander (1972), Eyrbyggja, replete with magic including seiðr, illusion and shape-shifting, and dead who walk, by Pálsson and Edwards (1973). These and other women as practitioners of seiðr and other 'magic' are more fully discussed by Blain in *The Journey with the Staff* (in preparation). However, our focus here is on men in the present day and the women are mentioned, because how present-day seiðworkers understand these saga accounts is important for the construction of their own practice.
5. See e.g. Driscoll (1995: 87, note 15) regarding "Icelandic hostility toward Gunnhildr".
6. From Icelandic at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/gisL.htm>, "Nú flytur Þorgrímur fram seiðinn og veitir sér umbúð eftir venju sinni og gerir sér hjall og fremur hann fætta fjölkynngilega með allri ergi og skelmiskap" (Chpt. 10). Gísla saga is available in translation from Johnston (1971). For Laxdæla saga, see Pálsson & Magnusson, 1969. Translations do not usually preserve the specificity of words relating to magical practice such as 'ergi', *fjölkyngi*, and so forth. While we make no claim to be linguists, it becomes necessary to trace these words and their use; sincere thanks are due to the providers of the Netútgáfan site at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/index.html>, who have made Icelandic versions readily available for researchers.
7. As for instance the Völuspá verse dealing with the coming of Heiðr, discussed by Blain (1999) and more fully discussed in *Nine Worlds of Seið-Magic* (Blain, in preparation). It is often taken to reflect an 'evil' nature of seiðr or analysed as a misogynistic interpolation. Less pejorative interpretations are, however, possible.
8. According, that is, to the story in Haralds saga hárfagra (Monsen, 1932). This may not necessarily be a 'factual' account, but it indicates something that Icelanders of the times of writing would have seen as a possibility.
9. We do not suggest that all seiðr is derived from Sámi practices; as Hultkrantz (1992) points out, this has been theorised, but never convincingly demonstrated. We imply only that by saga times, 'Finns' appear to have been seen as teachers of seiðwomen and that an association seems likely.
10. The four case studies are not necessarily representative of Seiðr practice as a whole, nor of Heathenism in general. To suggest otherwise would homogenise not only the diverse practices apparent in contemporary Heathenism, but also the variety of experiences that our four 'informants' narrate. Rather than exploring Heathenism or Seiðr writ large, this paper is

interested in the non-normative (relative to both Heathenism and Western society) approach of four male seiðworkers to their spiritual practices and effects on their gender identity.

11. Lokasenna, 24. First three lines from the translation by Carolyn Larrington (1996: 89), Larrington's fourth line gives 'and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert' which keeps the spirit of 'insult' possibly denoted by the word 'ergi'. Old Icelandic from Kuhn (1962) is  
 Enn þic seiða kóðo  
 Sámseyo í oc draptu á vétt sem völor;  
 vitca líki fórtu vefiódð yfir,  
 oc hugða ec þat args aðal.
12. The issue is not authenticity, since these informants are not claiming to be reconstructing seiðr 'exactly' as they did in the past. Seiðr is very much a contemporary practice, reconstructed for and in the present.

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